

JULIAN STREET

ABROAD AT HOME

AMERICAN RAMBLINGS, OBSERVATIONS
AND ADVENTURES

Illustrated



GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

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CHAPTER II

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

ALIGHTING from the train at Buffalo, I was reminded of my earlier reflection that railway stations should express their cities. In Buffalo the thought is painful. If that city were in fact, expressed by its present railway stations, people would not get off there voluntarily; they would have to be put off. And yet, from what I have been told, the curious and particularly ugly relic which is the New York Central Station there, to-day, does tell a certain story of the city. Buffalo has long been torn by factional quarrels—among them a protracted fight as to the location of a modern station for the New York Central Lines. The East Side wants it; the West Side wants it. Neither has it. The old station still stands—at least it was standing when I left Buffalo, for I was very careful not to bump it with my suit case.

This difference of opinion between the East Side and the West with regard to the placing of a station is, I am informed, quite typical of Buffalo. Socially, commercially, religiously, politically, the two sides disagree. The dividing line between them, geographically, is not, as might be supposed, Division Street. (That, by the

ABROAD AT HOME

way, is a peculiarity of highways called "Division Street" in most cities—they seldom divide anything more important than one row of buildings from another.) The real street of division is called Main.

Main Street! How many American towns and cities have used that name, and what a stupid name it is! It is as characterless as a number, and it lacks the number's one excuse for being. If names like Tenth Street or Eleventh Avenue fail to kindle the imagination they do not fail, at all events, to help the stranger find his way—although it should be added that strangers do, somehow, manage to find their way about in London, Paris, and even Boston, where the modern American system of numbering streets and avenues is not in vogue. But I am not agitating against the numbering of streets. Indeed, I fear I rather believe in it, as I believe in certain other dull but useful things like work and government reports. What I am crying out about is the stupid naming of such streets as carry names. Why do we have so many Main Streets? Do you think we lack imagination? Then look at the names of Western towns and Kansas girls and Pullman cars! The thing is an enigma.

Main Street is not only a bad name for a thoroughfare; the quality which it implies is unfortunate. And that quality may be seen in Main Street, Buffalo. On an exaggerated scale that street is like the Main Street of a little town, for the business district, the retail shopping district, all the city's activities string along on

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

either side. It is bad for a city to grow in that elongated way just as it is bad for a human being. To either it imparts a kind of gawky awkwardness.

The development of Main Street, Buffalo, has been natural. That is just the trouble; it has been too natural. Originally it was the Iroquois trail; later the route followed by the stages coming from the East. So it has grown up from log-cabin days. It is a fine, broad street; all that it lacks is "features." It runs along its wide, monotonous way until it stops in the squalid surroundings of the river; and if the river did not happen to be there to stop it, it would go on and on developing, indefinitely, and uninterestingly, in that direction as well as in the other.

The thing which Buffalo lacks physically is a recognizable center; a point at which a stranger would stop, as he stops in Piccadilly Circus or the Place de l'Opéra, and say to himself with absolute assurance: "Now I am at the very heart of the city." Every city ought to have a center, and every center ought to signify in its spaciousness, its arrangement and its architecture, a city's dignity. Buffalo is, unfortunately, far from being alone in her need of such a thing. Where Buffalo is most at fault is that she does not even seem to be thinking of municipal distinction. And very many other cities are. Cleveland is already attaining it in a manner which will be magnificent; Chicago has long planned and is slowly executing; Denver has work upon a splendid municipal center well under way; so has San

ABROAD AT HOME

Francisco; St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Grand Rapids have plans for excellent municipal improvements. Even St. Paul is waking up and widening an important business street.

Every one knows that what is called "a wave of reform" has swept across the country, but not every one seems to know that there is also surging over the United States a "wave" of improved public taste. I shall write more of this later. Suffice it now to say that it manifests itself in countless forms: in municipal improvements of the kind of which the Cleveland center is, perhaps, the best example in the country; in architecture of all classes; in household furniture and decoration; in the tendency of art museums to realize that modern American paintings are the finest modern paintings obtainable in the world to-day; in the tendency of private art collectors not to buy quite so much rubbish as they have bought in the past; in the Panama-Pacific Exposition, which will be the most beautiful exposition anybody ever saw; and in innumerable other ways. Indeed, public taste in the United States has, in the last ten years, taken a leap forward which the mind of to-day cannot hope to measure. The advance is nothing less than marvelous, and it is reflected, I think, in every branch of art excepting one: the literary art, which has in our day, and in our country, reached an abysmal depth of degradation.

With Cleveland so near at hand as an example, and

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

so many other American cities thinking about civic beauty, Buffalo ought soon to begin to rub her eyes, look about, and cast up her accounts. Perhaps her trouble is that she is a little bit too prosperous with an olden-time prosperity; a little bit too somnolent and satisfied. There is plenty to eat; business is not so bad; there are good clubs, and there is a delightful social life and a more than ordinary degree of cultivation. Furthermore, there may be a new station for the New York Central some day, for it is a fact that there are now some street cars which actually *cross* Main Street, instead of stopping at the Rubicon and making passengers get out, cross on foot, and take the other car on the other side! That, in itself, is a startling state of things. Evidently all that is needed now is an earthquake.

I have remarked before that cities, like people, have habits. Just as Detroit has the automobile habit, Pittsburgh the steel habit, Erie, Pa., the boiler habit, Grand Rapids the furniture habit, and Louisville the (if one may say so) whisky habit, Buffalo had in earlier times the transportation habit. The first fortunes made in Buffalo came originally from the old Central Wharf, where toll was taken of the passing commerce. Hand in hand with shipping came that business known by the unpleasant name of "jobbing." From the opening of the Erie Canal until the late seventies, jobbing flourished in Buffalo, but of recent years

ABROAD AT HOME

her jobbing territory has diminished as competition with surrounding centers has increased.

The early profits from docks and shipping were considerable. The business was easy; it involved comparatively small investment and but little risk. So when, with the introduction of through bills of lading, this business dwindled, it was hard for Buffalo to readjust herself to more daring ventures, such as manufacturing. "For," as a Buffalo man remarked to me, "there is only one thing more timid than a million dollars, and that is two million." It was the same gentleman, I think, who, in comparing the Buffalo of to-day with the Buffalo of other days, called my attention to the fact that not one man in the city is a director of a steam-railroad company.

From her geographical position with regard to ore, limestone, and coal it would seem that Buffalo might well become a great iron and steel city like Cleveland, but for some reason her ventures in this direction have been unfortunate. One steel company in which Buffalo money was invested, failed; another has been struggling along for some years and has not so far proved profitable. Some Buffalonians made money in a land boom a dozen or so years since; then came the panic, and the boom burst with a loud report, right in Buffalo's face.

Back of most of this trouble there seems to have been a streak of real ill luck.

There is a great deal of money in Buffalo, but it is wary money—financial wariness seems to be another

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

Buffalo habit. And there are other cities with the same characteristic. You can tell them because, when you begin to ask about various enterprises, people will say: "No, we have n't this and we have n't that, but this is a safe town in times of financial panic." That is what they say in Buffalo; they also say it in St. Louis and St. Paul. But if they say it in Chicago, or Minneapolis, or Kansas City, or in those lively cities of the Pacific slope, I did not hear them. Those cities are not worrying about financial panics which may come some day, but are busy with the things which are.

If you ask a Buffalo man what is the matter with his city, he will, very likely, sit down with great solemnity and try to tell you, and even call a friend to help him, so as to be sure that nothing is overlooked. He may tell you that the city lacks one great big dominating man to lead it into action; or that there has been, until recently, lack of coöperation between the banks; or that there are ninety or a hundred thousand Poles in the city and only about the same number of people springing from what may be called "old American stock." Or he may tell you something else.

If, upon the other hand, you ask a Minneapolis man that question, what will he do? He will look at you pityingly and think you are demented. Then he will tell you very positively that there is nothing the matter with Minneapolis, but that there is something definitely the matter with any one who thinks there is! Yes, in-

ABROAD AT HOME

deed! If you want to find out what is the matter with Minneapolis, it is still necessary to go for information to St. Paul. As you proceed westward, such a question becomes increasingly dangerous.

Ask a Kansas City man what is wrong with his town and he will probably attack you; and as for Los Angeles—! Such a question in Los Angeles would mean the calling out of the National Guard, the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, and all the “boosters” (which is to say the entire population of the city); the declaring of martial law, a trial by summary court-martial, and your immediate execution. The manner of your execution would depend upon the phrasing of your question. If you had asked: “Is there anything wrong with Los Angeles?” they’d probably be content with selling you a city lot and then hanging you; but if you said: “What *is* wrong with Los Angeles?” they would burn you at the stake and pickle your remains in vitriol.

At this juncture I find myself oppressed with the idea that I haven’t done Buffalo justice. Also, I am annoyed to discover that I have written a great deal about business. When I write about business I am almost certain to be wrong. I dislike business very much—almost as much as I dislike politics—and the idea of infringing upon the field of friends of mine like Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, Miss Tarbell, Samuel Hopkins Adams, Will Irwin. and others,

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

is extremely distasteful to me. But here is the trouble: so many writers have run a-muckraking that, nowadays, when a writer appears in any American city, every one assumes that he is scouting around in search of "shame." The result is that you don't have to hunt for shame. People bring it to you by the cartload. They don't give you time to explain that you are n't a shame collector—that you don't even know a good piece of shame when you see it—they just drive up, dump it at your door, and go back to get another load.

My companion and I were new at the game in Buffalo. As the loads of shame began to arrive, we had a feeling that something was going wrong with our trip. We had come in search of cheerful adventure, yet here we were barricaded in by great bulwarks of shame. In a few hours there was enough shame around us to have lasted all the reformers and muckrakers I know a whole month. We could n't see over the top of it. It hypnotized us. We began to think that probably shame *was* what we wanted, after all. Every one we met assumed it was what we wanted, and when enough people assume a certain thing about you it is very difficult to buck against them. By the second day we had ceased to be human and had begun to act like muckrakers. We became solemn, silent, mysterious. We would pick up a piece of shame, examine it, say "*Ha!*" and stick it in our pockets. When some white-faced Buffalonian would drive up with another load of shame I would go up to him, wave my finger under his nose and, trying to

ABROAD AT HOME

look as much like Steffens as I could, say in a sepulchral voice: "Come! Out with it! What are you holding back? Tell me all! Who tore up the missing will?" Then that poor, honest, terrified Buffalonian would gasp and try to tell me all, between his chattering teeth. And when he had told me all I would continue to glare at him horribly, and ask for more. Then he would begin making up stories, inventing the most frightful and shocking lies so as not to disappoint me. I would print some of them here, but I have forgotten them. That is the trouble with the amateur muckraker or reformer. His mind is n't trained to his work. He is constantly allowing it to be diverted by some pleasant thing.

For instance, some one pointed out to me that the water front of the city, along the Niagara River, is so taken up by the railroads that the public does not get the benefit of that water life which adds so much to the charm of Cleveland and Detroit. That situation struck me as affording an excellent piece of muck to rake. For is n't it always the open season so far as railroads are concerned?

I ought to have kept my mind on that, but in my childlike way I let myself go ambling off through the parks. I found the parks delightful, and in one of them I came upon a beautiful Greek temple, built of marble and containing a collection of paintings of which any city should be proud. Now that is a disconcerting sort of thing to find when you have just abandoned your-

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

self to the idea of becoming a muckraker! How can you muckrake a gallery like that? It can't be done.

With the possible exception of the Chicago Art Institute my companion and I did not see, upon our entire journey, any gallery of art in which such good judgment had been shown in the selection of paintings as in the Albright Gallery in Buffalo. Though the Chicago Art Institute is much the larger and richer museum, and though its collection is more comprehensive, its modern art is far more heterogeneous than that of Buffalo. One admires that Albright Gallery not only for the paintings which hang upon its walls, but also for those which do not hang there. Judgment has been shown not only in selecting paintings but (one concludes) in rejecting gifts. I do not know that the Albright Gallery has rejected gifts, but I do know that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Chicago Art Institute have, at times, failed to reject gifts which should have been rejected. Almost all museums fail in that respect in their early days. When a rich man offers a bad painting, or a roomful of bad paintings, the museum is afraid to say "No," because rich men must be propitiated. That has been the curse of art museums; they have to depend on rich men for support. And rich men, however generous they may be, and however much they may be interested in art, are, for the most part, lacking in any true and deep under-

ABROAD AT HOME

standing of it. That is one trouble with being rich—it does n't give you time to be much of anything else. If rich men really did *know* art, there would not be so many art dealers, and so many art dealers would not be going to expensive tailors and riding in expensive limousines.

Those who control the Albright Gallery have been wise enough to specialize in modern American painting. They have not been impressed, as so many Americans still are impressed, by the sound of the word "Europe." Nor have they attempted to secure old masters.

Does it not seem a mistake for any museum not possessed of enormous wealth to attempt a collection of old masters? A really fine example of the work of an old master ties up a vast amount of money, and, however splendid it may be, it is only one canvas, after all; and one or two or three old masters do not make a representative collection. Rather, it seems to me, they tend to disturb balance in a small museum.

To many American ears "Europe" is still a magic word. It makes little difference that Europe remains the happy hunting ground of the advanced social climber; but it makes a good deal of difference that so many American students of the arts continue to believe that there is some mystic thing to be gotten over there which is unobtainable at home. Europe has done much for us and can still do much for us, but we must learn not to accept blindly as we have in the past. Until quite recently, American art museums did, for the most part,

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

buy European art which was in many instances absolutely inferior to the art produced at home. And unless I am very much mistaken a third-rate portrait painter, with a European name (and a clever dealer to push him) can still come over here and reap a harvest of thousands while Americans with more ability are making hundreds.

One of the brightest signs for American painting to-day is the fact that it is now found profitable to make and sell forgeries of the works of our most distinguished modern artists—even living ones. This is a new and encouraging situation. A few years ago it was hardly worth a forger's time to make, say, a false Hassam, when he might just as well be making a Corot—which reminds me of an amusing thing a painter said to me the other day.

We were passing through an art gallery, when I happened to see at the end of one room three canvases in the familiar manner of Corot.

"What a lot of Corots there are in this country," I remarked.

"Yes," he replied. "Of the ten thousand canvases painted by Corot, there are thirty thousand in the United States."

There are two interesting hotels in Buffalo. One, the Iroquois, is characterized by a kind of solid dignity and has for years enjoyed a high reputation. It is patronized to-day at luncheon time by many of

ABROAD AT HOME

Buffalo's leading business men. Another, the Statler, is more "commercial" in character. My companion and I happened to stop at the latter, and we became very much interested in certain things about it. For one thing, every room in the hotel has running ice water and a bath—either a tub or a shower. Everywhere in that hotel we saw signs. At the desk, when we entered, hung a sign which read: *Clerk on duty, Mr. Pratt.*

There were signs in our bedrooms, too. I don't remember all of them, but there was one bearing the genial invitation: *Criticize and suggest for the improvement of our service. Complaint and suggestion box in lobby.*

While I was in that hotel I had nothing to "criticize and suggest," but I have been in other hotels where, if such an invitation had been extended to me, I should have stuffed the box.

Besides the signs, we found in each of our rooms the following: a clothes brush; a card bearing on one side a calendar and on the other side a list of all trains leaving Buffalo, and their times of departure; a memorandum pad and pencil by the telephone; a Bible ("Placed in this hotel by the Gideons"), and a pincushion, containing not only a variety of pins (including a large safety pin), but also needles threaded with black thread and white, and buttons of different kinds, even to a suspender button.

But aside from the prompt service we received, I think the thing which pleased us most about that hotel

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

was a large sign in the public wash room, downstairs. Had I come from the West I am not sure that sign would have startled me so much, but coming from New York—! Well, this is what it said:

Believing that voluntary service in washrooms is distasteful to guests, attendants are instructed to give no service which the guest does not ask for.

Time and again, while we were in Buffalo, my companion and I made excuses to go downstairs and wash our hands in the public washroom, just for the pleasure of doing so without fear of being attacked by a swarthy brigand with a brush. We became positively fond of the melancholy washroom boy in that hotel. There was something pathetic in the way he stood around waiting for some one to say: "Brush me!" Day after day he pursued his policy of watchful waiting, hoping against hope that something would happen—that some one would fall down in the mud and really need to be brushed; that some one would take pity on him and let himself be brushed anyhow. The pathos of that boy's predicament began to affect us deeply. Finally we decided, just before leaving Buffalo, to go downstairs and let him brush us. We did so. When we asked him to do it he went very white at first. Then, with a glad cry, he leaped at us and did his work. It was a real brushing we got that day—not a mere slap on the back with a whisk broom, meaning "Stand and deliver!" but the kind of brushing

ABROAD AT HOME

that takes the dust out of your clothes. The wash room was full of dust before he got through. Great clouds of it went floating up the stairs, filling the hotel lobby and making everybody sneeze. When he finished we were renovated. "How much do you think we ought to give him for all this?" I asked of my companion.

"If the conventional dime which we give the wash-room boys in New York hotels," he replied, "is proper payment for the services they render, I should say we ought to give this boy about twenty-seven dollars."

There are many other things about Buffalo which should be mentioned. There is the Buffalo Club—the dignified, solid old club of the city; and there is the Saturn Club, "where women cease from troubling and the wicked are at rest." And there is Delaware Avenue, on which stand both these clubs, and many of the city's finest homes.

Unlike certain famous old residence streets in other cities, Delaware Avenue still holds out against the encroachments of trade. It is a wide, fine street of trees and lawns and residences. Despite the fact that many of its older houses are of the ugly though substantial architecture of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, and many of its newer ones lack architectural distinction, the general effect of Delaware Avenue is still fine and American.

My impression of this celebrated street was neces-

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

sarily hurried, having been acquired in the course of sundry dashes down its length in motor cars. I recall a number of its buildings only vaguely now, but there is one which I admired every time I saw it, and which still clings in my memory both as a building and as a sermon on the enduring beauty of simplicity and good, old-fashioned lines—the office of Spencer Kellogg & Sons, at the corner of Niagara Square.

It happened that just before we left New York there was a newspaper talk about some rich women who had organized a movement of protest against the ever-increasing American tendency toward show and extravagance. We were, therefore, doubly interested when we heard of a similar activity on the part of certain fashionable women of Buffalo.

Our hostess at a dinner party there was the first to mention it, but several other ladies added details. They had formed a few days before a society called the "Simplicity League," the members of which bound themselves to give each other moral support in their efforts to return to a more primitive mode of life. I cannot recall now whether the topic came up before or after the butler and the footman came around with caviar and cocktails, but I know that I had learned a lot about it from charming and enthusiastic ladies at either side of me before the sherry had come on; that, by the time the sauterne was served, I was deeply impressed, and that,

ABROAD AT HOME

with the roast and the Burgundy, I was prepared to take the field against all comers, not only in favor of simplicity, but in favor of anything and everything which was favored by my hostess. Throughout the salad, the ices, the Turkish coffee, and the Corona-coronas I remained her champion, while with the port—ah! nothing, it seems to me, recommends the old order of things quite so thoroughly as old port, which has in it a sermon and a song. After dinner the ladies told us more about their league.

"We don't intend to go to any foolish extremes," said one who looked like the apotheosis of the Rue de la Paix. "We are only going to scale things down and eliminate waste. There is a lot of useless show in this country which only makes it hard for people who can't afford things. And even for those who can, it is wrong. Take the matter of dress—a dress can be simple without looking cheap. And it is the same with a dinner. A dinner can be delicious without being elaborate. Take this little dinner we had to-night—"

"*What?*" I cried.

"Yes," she nodded. "In future we are all going to give plain little dinners like this."

"*Plain?*" I gasped.

Our hostess overheard my choking cry.

"Yes," she put in. "You see, the league is going to practise what it preaches."

"But I did n't think it had begun yet! I thought this dinner was a kind of farewell feast—that it was—"

BIFURCATED BUFFALO

Our hostess looked grieved. The other ladies of the league gazed at me reproachfully.

"Why!" I heard one exclaim to another, "I don't believe he noticed!"

"Did n't you notice?" asked my hostess.

I was cornered.

"Notice?" I asked. "Notice *what?*"

"That we did n't have champagne!" she said.